

GREEK LETTER DISCRIMINATION

"Fraternities Without Brotherhood"

JAMES RORTY

"I KNOW your friend Jones thinks he's doing me a big favor. But the fact is I can't afford the time or the money for this fraternity nonsense. What's more, I'd lose most of my friends; I figure that about half of them are black, yellow, or Jewish. Believe it or not, these fraternity characters don't rate around here any more."

Thus did a contemporary youth—white, Gentile, active in undergraduate affairs, and an honor student—decline membership in one of the most exclusive "Aryan" national fraternities at a large university.

The university in this case was somewhat exceptional. But not the student. According to a 1949 Roper survey, 60 per cent of all American students are opposed to any group rejection by fraternities. President Henry Merritt Wriston of Brown has said that racial and religious restrictions would soon disappear if left to the students. It is the alumni who insist on these restrictions. It is the elders of the Greek letter tribes who perpetuate on the American campus the social taboos and segregations that are steadily receding in almost every other area of American life.

RACIAL and religious prejudice, which is increasingly on the defensive in modern America, is still entrenched on the college campus in the discriminatory practices of too many fraternities and sororities, as this report by JAMES RORTY—which draws on the evidence amassed and analyzed by Alfred McClung Lee in his recently published *Fraternities Without Brotherhood* (Beacon Press)—makes clear. Mr. Rorty, the veteran journalist, is well known to the readers of COMMENTARY for his past contributions on intergroup relations and civil liberties. He is a resident of Flatbrookville, New Jersey.

Despite abundant evidence that the post-war generation of college students is against racial and religious discrimination, the national fraternities haven't really reformed. Nor is their power declining—though it does not seem to be increasing either. In *Fraternities Without Brotherhood*, a study sponsored by the National Committee on Fraternities in Education, Alfred McClung Lee reports that the number of national fraternity chapters has more than doubled since World War II, and that further growth is expected, paralleling the increase of college enrollments. Many of these nationals still retain restrictive clauses in their constitutions; others have evaded pressure by transferring the restrictions to their secret rituals.

At its 1954 national convention the Phi Delta Theta fraternity changed its constitutional requirement for admission from "full Aryan blood" to "socially acceptable"—at the same time sustaining its suspension of the Amherst and Williams chapters for pledging "non-Aryans." The pin-wearing, double-gripping elders who direct the destinies of the national fraternities are quite prepared to be their younger brothers' keepers in the matter of interpreting the concept of "brotherhood." They are also not at all unwilling to enter a contest of power politics with the relatively small group of university and college presidents and trustees who are demanding the abandonment of racial and religious membership restrictions.

In July 1954, the executive board of the National Interfraternity Conference resolved, unanimously, that "more unified action such as the withdrawal of all charters at an institution may be necessary or desirable as a means of self-preservation." Six months later, however, the National Inter-

fraternity Conference itself adopted a less belligerent—and possibly less suicidal—gesture, recommending in its minutes that “problems in specific cases be worked out by direct and friendly negotiation.”

Sororities discriminate too, of course, but more discreetly. Such matters are rarely referred to the National Panhellenic Conference, which is the women’s equivalent of the National Interfraternity Conference. “Very quietly,” writes Dr. Lee, “and in all but one case without written statements of policy, sororities segregate themselves even more effectively than do the men.”

Merely by putting nothing in writing, some of the most snobbish and discriminatory of the Greek letter societies have been able to evade and frustrate the efforts of college authorities to deal with the problem of group rejection on the campus. But the college authorities who have made such efforts are a small minority. Of the 125 institutions surveyed by the National Committee on Fraternities in Education, 95 expressed no interest in the problem. Most of those that did express an interest are attempting to reform the national fraternities, while retaining them on the campus. Their efforts range all the way from mild persuasion to ultimata giving a local chapter a “deadline for democracy.” If by the expiration of a stated period the local has not persuaded its national to eliminate the discriminatory clauses in its constitution, it must surrender its national charter or be dissolved.

The more devout of the elder brothers would seem to be convinced that a local brought to such a pass would surely suffer worse-than-death fate. Actually, the result often proves to be a blessing. In 1946 the Middlebury (Vermont) chapter of Alpha Sigma Phi initiated four Jewish students, although the national ritual specifies an exclusive policy based on race and religion. When the national elders protested, the Middlebury chapter asked for the elimination of the discriminatory clauses, which the elders refused. Whereupon Middlebury’s Alpha Sigma Phi surrendered its charter, reconstituted itself as Alpha Sigma Psi, and

proceeded to flourish like the green bay tree. Not only did it succeed in pledging better than its share of prominent athletes and scholars; it also prospered financially, so that it was able to buy a handsome new home.

Amherst’s Phi Kappa Psi’s had a similar experience. In 1948, after pledging the Negro cross-country runner, Thomas W. Gibbs, and refusing to de-pledge him at the insistence of the elders, the Amherst local reconstituted itself as Phi Alpha Phi. The chief consequences were that the new local saved \$1,000 a year in dues to the national, and thereafter, in most years, led the Amherst campus in scholastic standing.

NOWHERE does the moral and psychological destructiveness of minority segregation manifest itself more cruelly than on the American campus. Sensitive and insecure adolescents are peculiarly unfitted to endure the shock of public rebuff and exclusion. To be a Jew carries a penalty which is worsened if one “looks like a Jew.” Italians are made morbidly conscious of their dark skins. A sorority with a Greek letter name at the University of Missouri excluded students who looked and were Greek. On the other hand, students with an Italian family background were blackballed only if they “looked Italian.”

American Indians, too, have been excluded from the brotherhood and sisterhood of the Greek letter societies. In 1951 the Psi Delta chapter at the University of Rhode Island wanted to pledge a Narragansett Indian girl, but found that the national constitution restricted membership to white girls. Six members of the chapter resigned in protest, including the campus queen and the chapter president.

In 1947 Upsala College in New Jersey acquired a new local sorority as a result of a similar conflict. It involved a Negro girl, Bernice Petty, who was proposed for membership in the Phi Omega Chi sorority by Naomi Charner, the valedictorian of her class. When Bernice was refused membership because of her color, Naomi resigned. Subsequently both girls became members of

a new local sorority, Delta Beta Delta, formed as a non-segregative group.

In 1946 the Phi Mu Delta chapter at the University of New Hampshire pledged the son of a Massachusetts judge, and he moved into the fraternity house. Then the college dean advised fraternity members that because the man was Jewish they should clear his eligibility with the national organization. The national ordered the chapter to cancel his pledge and to move the man out of the house. Dr. Lee quotes a chapter member's description of this grisly episode. "It was awful. . . . The kid's parents came to help move him to the dormitory. I remember how terrible it was. His mother was crying. But what was worse was his father. That man didn't say a word to anyone."

It is against moral outrages of this sort that minority groups have sought to protect themselves by the establishment of their own fraternities and sororities. Unhappily, segregation breeds segregation, whether on the campus or in the suburban housing developments of our great cities. Most of the Jewish, Negro, and Catholic fraternities established during the past half century excluded members of other races and creeds. But even when they didn't the effect was to harden the discriminatory pattern.

"The pattern of segregation is fixed by the so-called white Caucasian fraternities," said a member of a Jewish fraternity. "We simply have to fit into it. If we are not permitted to join other fraternities, we must form a fraternity of our own. Nobody really *likes* to live in a ghetto. But sometimes you have to."

Obviously, the fostering of campus ghettos is not a solution of the problem, either in principle or in practice, and most educators recognize this. In 1928, because he feared it would aggravate divisiveness on the Brown University campus, President William Herbert Perry Faunce refused to sanction the establishment of a Jewish fraternity at Brown. Unfortunately, President Faunce did nothing to solve the problem that had provoked the demand for a Jewish group.

Twenty years before, the same problem had led to the establishment at Yale of Pi Lambda Phi, a non-discriminatory fraternity welcoming Jews and Gentiles, Catholics and Negroes, without any racial or religious restriction. Chapters of the Pi Lambda Phi national have been chartered on over forty campuses, but all of them have remained largely Jewish in membership. As Dr. Lee writes: "Without cooperation or support from other fraternities, and from college administrators, its members found themselves forced to yield to the pressures making for minority self-segregation in spite of their apparent intellectual awareness of its anti-democratic nature and its destructive consequences."

The social climate of the American campus has proved in the past to be almost equally unfavorable to the growth of the avowedly non-discriminatory college fraternities established by majority-group students. Of these the most important were Beta Sigma Tau and the American Association of Commons Clubs, both of which date from World War I. Their principles and objectives were similar: to level all barriers of race, creed, or nationality and "make democracy a living reality on the campus."

During this writer's college years a Commons Club flourished on the campus of Tufts College, where it initiated many of the ablest students, including Jews, Catholics, and dark-skinned Latin Americans. The Commons Club was well represented in the self-perpetuating junior and senior honorary societies. When new members of these societies were elected, it seemed, even in that earlier period, as if the student leaders rather welcomed a chance to repudiate the snobbism of the fraternities to which most of them belonged.

On most campuses, however, the competition of the national fraternities, many of whose chapter houses are comfortably endowed by the alumni brothers, aborted the growth of what seemed a most promising and wholesome development. Dr. Lee notes that of the 17 undergraduate chapters included in the American Association of Com-

mons Clubs between 1917 and 1937, twelve became inactive, and that since then the group has gained one chapter and lost one.

COLLEGE fraternities had an auspicious beginning in this country in 1764 when the Society of Phi Beta Kappa was established at William and Mary College, in Virginia, as a social and literary fraternity with a secret ritual. Later Phi Beta Kappa dropped its ritual and became what it is now, a non-secret society whose members are chosen on the basis of scholastic achievement in the liberal arts.

Our present national—and social—fraternity system has a later and quite different origin. The three earliest nationals were established at Union College (Schenectady) during the first decades of the 19th century, and from the beginning most college authorities looked askance at them, considering them to be forms of anti-educational juvenile delinquency which they were in duty bound to suppress. Hence most of the early fraternities were forced to lead an underground life until after the Civil War.

During the 60's a group of Confederate officers, all of them college fraternity men, formed a convivial society called Kuklos at first (from the Greek word for circle). Later the word Klan was added for alliterative purposes. As the Ku Klux Klan, the organization devoted itself to forms of terrorization for which the hazing practices of the early fraternities provided a less violent model.

The Ku Klux creed of white supremacy, nourished by the "Aryanism" of Gobineau, Madison Grant, and other racist ideologues, left a significant residue in the rituals of some of the college fraternities; witness the constitution of Phi Delta Theta, written in 1912, which provides that "only white persons of full Aryan blood, not less than sixteen years of age, should be eligible."

By 1928, more than half of the national college fraternities and sororities had specific rules requiring exclusion along racial and religious lines, while others had the same policy but did not find it either necessary

or in good taste to assert it formally.

The year 1880, according to Dr. Lee, marks a turning point in the history of social fraternities. In that year they were able to bring about the dismissal of the president of Purdue University because he had demanded that students disavow intentions of affiliating with a fraternity. Thereafter, college authorities found it less and less practicable to deal with the fraternity problem by the earlier methods of outlawry and expulsion.

Yet, despite the increasing influence wielded by fraternity alumni, college presidents, and trustees, a substantial number of large, medium, and small institutions are today without fraternities. Among these are Harvard, Princeton, and the California Institute of Technology; Annapolis, West Point, and Citadel; Grinnell, Haverford, Reed College, Rice Institute; Vassar, Wellesley, Mt. Holyoke, Bryn Mawr, Smith, Bennington, Radcliffe, and Sarah Lawrence; Fordham, and many other institutions operated by the Catholic teaching orders.

The experience of Princeton is especially instructive because it extends over a long period and involves not only fraternities but also eating clubs—Princeton's celebrated "Halls," two of which, the Whig and the Cliosophic societies, date back to 1760. Greek letter societies did not appear on the Princeton campus until 1843, the first being Beta Theta Pi. During the next eleven years, ten other chapters of nationals were established, despite the hostility of the college authorities, who felt that the fraternities undermined the influence of the Halls. In 1855 the faculty and trustees required all students to sign a pledge not to join a fraternity, on pain of dismissal. Some students were actually expelled under this rule, and the fraternities were forced to go underground.

In 1875 a faculty committee undertook to ferret out a persistent remnant of the Greek letter "underground" at Princeton. It temporarily suspended some students who had appeared in a fraternity group photograph and refused—apparently with strong student support—an alumni petition to permit the open

and unrestricted existence of fraternities on the campus.

By 1882 the last sub-rosa fraternity had disappeared from Princeton. There remained the eating clubs. They had the support of the administration until, in 1907, their snobbish self-segregation aroused the reforming zeal of Princeton's new president. The eating clubs were side-shows, declared Woodrow Wilson, which threatened to swallow the educational circus. They should be replaced by quadrangles where students and faculty members would live together and mix social and educational life.

Wilson did not get his quadrangles, nor did he succeed in abolishing the eating clubs. Faced with stiff opposition from alumni and students, he was forced into a compromise agreement: the eating clubs undertook to restrict their membership to juniors and seniors. But they retained all their restrictions, which left about a quarter of the Princeton student body unbid and unserved, including most members of minority groups.

In 1941 the trustees demanded the election of a larger proportion of students, and during the next three years almost all eligible students achieved membership in the clubs. After a wartime shutdown, the returning students demanded the full democratization of the halls. Four-fifths of the 1949-50 sophomores signed a petition declaring that they would not join any club unless the clubs as a whole accepted all their classmates.

Today, racial and religious barriers have been lowered at Princeton; any student who is eligible and interested can join an eating club, although not always the one of his choice. As before, the clubs enjoy varying degrees of status and prestige; all of them now have one or more Jewish members.

AFTER nearly a decade of struggle, a somewhat similar kind of democratization has been achieved at Amherst. There, national and local fraternities continue to operate, but under rules even more stringent than those which govern Princeton's eating clubs.

Amherst has had fraternities for over a century, in which time they frequently came into conflict with the college administration. The ending of World War II, during which most of the fraternities at Amherst and elsewhere became inactive, brought a showdown. Faculty and alumni committees were appointed to study the problem. They concluded that fraternities were anti-democratic in principle and anti-intellectual in purpose, and that "in both respects the existence of fraternities conflicts with the fundamental aims of the college."

Accordingly, both committees recommended to the trustees that fraternities be eliminated at Amherst. The trustees, however, rejected this recommendation, preferring a compromise. While agreeing that the objections to the fraternities were substantial, they felt that these objections might be overcome without destroying the system. Accordingly, they promulgated a set of rules to which the fraternities must comply as a condition of re-opening after their wartime shutdown. Each fraternity would have to certify "that there is no prohibition or restriction by reason of race, color, or creed affecting the selection of members of such chapter." Fraternities whose national organizations required self-segregative practices were given a five-year period of grace during which they were expected to bring about the required changes in the constitutions of the nationals.

Delta Tau Delta and Sigma Nu refused to comply with this rule and did not re-establish their Amherst chapters. Two other national fraternity chapters—those of Phi Kappa Psi and Phi Delta Theta—have been replaced by unaffiliated locals. Other changes enforced by the trustees have resulted in a salutary transformation of the social situation on the Amherst campus. Amherst freshmen are not eligible for membership in fraternities and rushing is not permitted until after the final examinations in the freshman year. Thus Amherst escapes the social *melée* of "rush week" that still demoralizes the first semester at most colleges, and the sorting process is based less on family connections,

race, and money and more on the ascertained merit and congeniality of individuals. Moreover, there are no psychologically wounded left-overs. Acting on the principle that any man good enough to be admitted to Amherst is good enough to be admitted to one of its component social groups, the college sponsors a club for those who do not wish to join fraternities. Not a "minority group," it functions on the same level of selectivity as the Greek letter fraternities. Incidentally, all fourteen of the latter have recently taken in students who not long ago would have been automatically excluded from consideration. The net result of these changes has been interestingly analyzed by Dr. Alfred Sherwood Romer, Amherst Phi Psi and director of Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology. "They have made Amherst less 'collegiate,'" writes Dr. Romer, returning it to a state "in which the college body—and consequently the fraternities—is closer to the older and healthier ideals of earlier decades."

The earlier decades to which Dr. Romer refers are presumably those before the national fraternities became formidable vested interests on American campuses; before they consolidated what President William Harold Cowley of Hamilton once called their "\$75,000,000 protest against the intellectualism of the college"; before the word "collegiate" came to connote such adolescent phenomena as hazing, drinking parties, sartorial exhibitionism, social snobbism, and contempt for the scholarly disciplines to which the academic community is presumably dedicated.

In that earlier period, college presidents and deans could ban or discipline the fraternities with relative impunity. But today there are few institutions which are prepared to emulate the courageous examples of Amherst, Middlebury, Williams, and Dartmouth, where the college authorities have given effective backing to the democratic idealism of a less "collegiate" generation of students.

As Dr. Lee points out, "college officials are well aware that a generation of college undergraduate leaders lasts at most only four years and, in an effective sense, usually

only two or three years. Influential alumni and donors, on the other hand, are powerful and continuing factors both in college and in the fraternities."

HENCE most college officials attempt to rationalize a "hands-off" policy. The result is that national fraternity leaders are permitted to drag their feet about removing restrictive clauses in their constitutions, and student pressure for change is stalled. As noted earlier, only twenty of the 125 institutions surveyed by the National Committee on Fraternities in Education have adopted any college policy on self-segregation and categorical discrimination, and only ten others have gone so far as to express hope. Ninety-five of those surveyed—four out of five—either say nothing or compose elaborate rationalizations of their position. In these curious semantic exercises, the refusal of a college administration to infringe upon the "freedom" of a national fraternity to be as discriminatory and unbrotherly as it likes is cited as a shining illustration of American democracy. For example, in 1949 Edmund Ezra Day, then president of Cornell University, declared: "Some of them [the fraternities] have conditions set forth in their constitutions barring certain minority groups. Well, if that's the kind of character they want to have, I would say that's their privilege. In my definition, that is not undemocratic. Exclusiveness is not undemocratic as long as it doesn't deny anybody's rights. . . ."

In 1951, Alexander G. Ruthven, then president of the University of Michigan, said: "We do not believe . . . that the University could, without discrimination, withdraw recognition and thus jeopardize vested property interests merely because the organization was unwilling or unable to waive its legal right to define in its constitution the qualifications of its members."

Even as late as 1953, Carl R. Woodward, president of the University of Rhode Island asserted: "Under our American concept of freedom and self-determination selective membership is in keeping with the democratic institutions of our society, and

the right of our fraternities to retain it should be protected."

This, of course, is an area of law, justice, and public policy that the Supreme Court of the United States, too, has quite recently explored, and it has come up with quite different conclusions. On November 8, 1954, six months after its historic decision outlawing segregation in the schools, the high court sustained the right of public institutions to define the policies that govern fraternal groups on its campuses. This decision, especially when coupled with probable future interpretations of the May 17, 1954, decision as it affects Greek letter societies in public colleges, is likely to influence profoundly the policies of both the colleges and the national fraternities.

The case which gave rise to the November 8, 1954, ruling of the Supreme Court grew out of the attempt of the State University of New York to eliminate racial and religious discrimination from fraternity admissions practices on the 22 campuses under its jurisdiction. The University had given the national chapters until October 1958 to disaffiliate from nationals that still retained group exclusion clauses in their constitutions or rituals. The position of the University was that all facilities under its supervision were part of its educational operations, and that fraternities were permitted and regulated for the social experience they provided. After investigating the recruitment practices of the fraternities, the University authorities concluded that it could no longer permit a double standard of admission to its facilities—a fair one for its classrooms and an unfair one for many of the social fraternities.

As a result of the Supreme Court's decision, state and municipally owned universities and colleges can now proceed to desegregate the social life of their campuses without fear of legal harassment. Such action is in fact clearly required for the practical implementation of the Supreme Court's desegregation order. In one of the studies quoted by Dr. Lee it was found that many Negro high school graduates in the North refused to apply to the excellent nearby col-

leges for which they were fully qualified. They chose Southern institutions, where they felt the environment would provide a happier—albeit an artificial—social experience. In their current struggles with the national fraternities, progressive college presidents have had frequent occasion to call attention to this situation. For example, in 1954 Dean Charles W. McCracken of Allegheny College, Meadville, Pennsylvania, addressed this plea to a campus fraternity:

"At present Allegheny has very few Negro students. It would no doubt enrich our college life if we could have a more representative student body in this respect. However, this would be of questionable value if the Negro students are discriminated against by any social group on the campus. Fraternity action is therefore a preliminary step towards a more healthy racial situation in the student population. Negro students will not come where they feel they are not wanted. . . . By removing discriminatory clauses from their charter, fraternities have an opportunity to make a significant contribution to a more democratic way of life. To accept this as their responsibility would be evidence of the practice of Christian brotherhood on which fraternities are justified in their existence."

Thus far the smaller private colleges such as Amherst, Williams, Middlebury, Dartmouth, and Allegheny have been obliged to shoulder a disproportionate share of the task of pioneering desegregation on American campuses. Most of the big state universities have long been strongholds of the national fraternity system. They recruit a more heterogeneous student body, which the fraternities subsequently sort and stratify, employing discriminatory racial and religious criteria in greater or less degree. The position taken by the State University of New York is thus far exceptional, but as a result of the 1954 Supreme Court decisions it may well be more generally adopted. In the state universities too, student sentiment is beginning to force the hands of the university administrators. As far back as 1938, the Interfraternity Council at the University of

Minnesota took a first step by inviting Jewish and Negro fraternities to take part in its social program. Ten years later, in 1948, a poll of all fraternity men and women showed a majority of 58 per cent favoring removal of racial and religious membership restrictions; of the male fraternity members, 70 per cent favored the elimination of racial and religious restrictions. By 1951, 83 per cent of the fraternity men bound by such restrictions and 89 per cent of those without them favored their removal.

Even at Cornell, where nineteen of the men's lodges have formal restrictive regulations, a 1952 poll showed strong undergraduate sentiment for their removal; only two of the nineteen approved the restrictive clauses.

At the University of California, the students and the administration are moving together towards the desegregation of the numerous U. of C. campuses. Recently, the University forced four chapters to sever their national ties in order to comply with a university ban on discriminatory membership policies.

In mapping the campus sector of the desegregation front, Dr. Lee and his collaborators have provided us with much fascinating sociological detail, along with valuable strategic guidance. The alignment of forces is clear. On the one hand, we have a postwar generation of students that is overwhelmingly against the group rejections still practiced, openly or covertly, by most of the national fraternities and sororities. Standing with the students are a few private and pub-

lic college authorities who refuse to rationalize or evade their obligation as educators to root out the weeds of institutionalized snobbism and prejudice that have flourished too long in the groves of academe.

Against them are a small group of strategically placed elder brothers and elder sisters; they hold the mortgages on the fraternity houses and attend *all* the conventions; often they are also trustees of the college. The silence and inaction of the great majority of college and university administrators testify to their power.

But the old men of the national fraternity councils cannot live forever, while undergraduate opposition to snobbism and prejudice may be expected to increase, both in the North and the South. Moreover, the long overdue civilizing of the Greek letter tribes need entail no diminution either of their status or of their genuine usefulness on the American campus; rather, it may be their salvation. The experience of the local chapters that have repudiated the taboos of the founding fathers suggests, in fact, that there is nothing the matter with the fraternity system that a good dose of democracy won't cure.

On the evidence of Dr. Lee's report, the odds would seem to be increasingly with the students, especially now that the Supreme Court has come out on their side. And as with educational segregation in general, the end of social segregation on the campus may come sooner than we can now foresee.